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Congress Responds To Tonkin Incident

This is the fourth of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.

"CHALLENGE AND RESPONSE VIETNAM 1964-1965"

In August 1964 an unexpected crisis developed, one that threatened for a time to change the nature of the war in Vietnam. During the early hours of Sunday morning, August 2, a high-priority message came in reporting that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked the destroyer USS Maddox in the Gulf of Tonkin.

The Maddox was on what we called the De Soto patrol. One purpose was to spot evidence of Hanoi's continuing infiltration of men and war supplies into South Vietnam by sea. Another was to gather electronic intelligence.

Another form of naval activity, not connected with our patrol, was going on in the area. During 1964 the South Vietnamese navy made small-scale strikes against installations along the North Vietnamese coast. The purpose was to interfere with Hanoi's continuing program of sending men and supplies into the South by sea. Senators and Representatives designated to oversee our intelligence operations were fully briefed on these South Vietnamese activities, and on our supporting role, in January 1964, again in May, twice in June, and again in early August. Secretary McNamara described the operations, codenamed 34-A, in a closed session with members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on August 3, 1964.

One 34-A attack occurred on July 30. At the time, the destroyer Maddox had not started its patrol and was 120 miles away. A second South Vietnamese attack took place the night of August 3 when the De Soto patrol was at least 70 miles away. It was later alleged that our destroyers were supporting the South Vietnamese naval action. The fact is our De Soto commanders did not even know where or when the 34-A attacks would occur.

Two days later the North Vietnamese struck again at our destroyers, this time at night (midmorning Washington time) on August 4. A few minutes after nine o'clock I had a call from McNamara. He informed me that our intelligence



message that strongly indicated the North Vietnamese were preparing another attack on our ships in the Tonkin Gulf. Soon we received messages from the destroyer Maddox that its radar and that of the USS C. Turner Joy had spotted vessels they believed to be hostile. The enemy ships appeared to be preparing an ambush. The Maddox and C. Turner Joy had changed course to avoid contact, but they then sent word that the enemy vessels were closing in at high speed. Within an hour the destroyers advised that they were being attacked by torpedoes and were firing on the enemy PT boats. As messages flowed in from Pacific Command Headquarters, McNamara passed along the key facts to me.

We had scheduled a noon meeting of the National Security Council to discuss the situation in Cyprus, and several key advisers had assembled for that session.

I closed the NSC meeting and asked Rusk, McNamara, Vance, McCone, and Bundy to join me for lunch. The unanimous view of those advisers was that we could not ignore this second provocation and that the attack required retaliation. I agreed. We decided on air boats and their bases plus a strike on

one oil depot.

During the afternoon additional intelligence reports flowed in. We intercepted a message from one of the attacking North Vietnamese boats in which it boasted of having fired at two "enemy airplanes" and claimed to have damaged one. The North Vietnamese skipper reported that his unit had "sacrificed two comrades." Our experts said this meant either two enemy boats or two men in the attack group. Another message to North Vietnamese PT boat headquarters boasted: "Enemy vessel perhaps wounded." Clearly the North Vietnamese knew they were attacking us.

Action reports continued to arrive from our destroyers, and from the Pacific Command. A few were ambiguous. One from the destroyer Maddox questioned whether the many reports of enemy torpedo firings were all valid.

I instructed McNamara to investigate these reports and obtain clarification. He immediately got in touch with Admiral U. S. G. Sharp Jr., the Commander in Chief, Pacific, and the Admiral in turn made contact with the De Soto patrol. McNamara and his civilian and military specialist went over all the evidence in specific detail. We wanted to be absolutely certain that our ships had actually been attacked before we retaliated.

Admiral Sharp called McNamara to report that after checking all the reports and evidence, he had no doubt whatsoever that an attack had taken place. McNamara and his associates reached the same firm conclusion. Detailed studies made after the incident confirmed this judgment.

I summoned the National Security Council for another meeting at 6:15 p.m. to discuss in detail the incident and our plans for a sharp but limited response. About seven o'clock I met with the congressional leadership in the White House for the same purpose. I told them that I believed a congressional resolution of support for our entire position in Southeast Asia was necessary and would strengthen our hand. I said that we might be forced to further action, and that I did not "want to go in unless Congress goes in with me."

I was determined, from the time I became President, to seek the fullest support of Congress for any major action that I took, whether in foreign affairs or in the domestic field.

Concerning Vietnam, I repeatedly told Secretaries Rusk and McNamara that I never wanted to receive any recommendation for action we might have to take unless it was accompanied by a proposal for assuring the backing of Congress.

Because of this, it became routine for all contingency plans to include suggestions for informing Congress and winning its support. As we considered the possibility of having to expand our efforts in Vietnam, proposals for seeking congressional authorization became part of the normal contingency

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The leader of the team that wrote the secret study wonders if we have yet learned what not to do GUEST PRIVILEGE: LESLIE H. GELB

Today's Lessons from the Pentagon Papers

Leslie H. Gelb was director of Defense Department Policy Planning and Arms Control from 1967 to 1969.

The scene is the same and the cameras begin to roll again. It is Take 26 in the Vietnam epic that began for us in 1945. The actors have changed, but the roles remain wholly recognizable. The present U.S. ambassador, Ellsworth Bunker, stands accused in the Saigon press of seeking, but failing, to bribe Big Minh to run for the South Vietnamese presidency in order to make the elections "honest." President Thieu predictably has the field all to himself for reelection in what is now clearly seen as an electoral mockery. Saigon's armed forces are reported to be stepping up their already wide-ranging activities in dope-pushing and black marketeering. Though the number of American casualties is greatly reduced, the dying—civilian and military—still goes on in South Vietnam. Back in the U.S., speculation is on the rise that the 1972 elections and President Nixon's impending trip to Peking promise an early end to the war in Vietnam.

These stories are in today's news. As I read them, I cannot shake the feeling of their simply

adding another chapter in the Pentagon papers. These papers, which dazzled in the headlines for over a month and continue their life on the paperback newsstands, have lessons to teach us about Vietnam and, more importantly, about how foreign policy is made in our nation—lessons which, I believe, are still unlearned.

Before talking about these lessons, I should clear up some misunderstandings of what we on the Vietnam History Task Force that produced the Pentagon papers set out to do. Secretary McNamara instructed us "to let the chips fall where they may," and did not in any way seek to intervene in or pass judgment on our efforts.

We were not a flock of doves working our vengeance on the Vietnam war. We were a group roughly of 18 military officers, nine civilians from different parts of the government and nine professional scholars from think tanks and universities. I would say that about one-fourth were basically supporters of administration policy, a handful were highly critical of the U.S. commitment, and the bulk did not question the commitment so much as the means for meeting the commitment. No one was ever asked his views before being signed on.

• Washington is a town which operates on the